

## **Local Food Hubs in Deprived Areas: An 'Action Pack' for Community Organisations**



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We would like to extend our gratitude to our four research partners (OFN UK, The Larder, Meadow Well Community Centre, Myatts Field), as well as other organisations that have been involved in the project. Special thanks are extended to Land Workers Alliance (Melanie Fryer), Intact Community Centre (Barry Mann), Creativity Works (Steve Egan, Chryssa Malfa-Erguvan), Plungington Community Centre (Ben Clayton, Emma Warden), Earth Doctors & Artisan Baker (Andy Hatton), Grimshaw Street Food Hub (Alina Belousova). We would also like to extend our gratitude to all the people who shared their time and insights with us by taking part in the research (surveys, interviews, focus groups) that this document is based on. We would like to thank Kay Johnson from the Larder as well as the Food Champions trainees for generously allowing us to participate in their meetings and become part of the team. We would like to also thank Nick Weir, Chryssa Malfa-Erguvan and Alison Watts for their feedback to earlier drafts of this document.

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## Forewords

It has been very rewarding to work with the pilot hubs on this project. They have all brought creativity, challenges and improvements to OFN and we are very pleased to see how all the hubs have found different ways for OFN to facilitate the inspiring work that they have done to build resilient local food economies in their areas. As more and more food producers and hubs join the Open Food Network (OFN) the opportunities for building enterprise relationships (see [www.openfoodnetwork.org](http://www.openfoodnetwork.org)) grows exponentially. At the time of publication OFN has 832 producers and 390 shops in the Network and these numbers are increasing every week. This means that:

- ❖ Hubs have rapidly increasing opportunities to link together and sell each other's products. This broadens the product ranges of the hubs and reduces distribution costs.
- ❖ There are increasing levels of peer support through the OFN community support forum (see [www.community.openfoodnetwork.org.uk](http://www.community.openfoodnetwork.org.uk)) where OFN users put up questions and suggestions and offer advice to each other. These topics include not only tips on how to make best use of the OFN functionality but also more general hubs topics like this one on how to increase hub sales (see [www.community.openfoodnetwork.org](http://www.community.openfoodnetwork.org)).

This action pack will help OFN to achieve its aims of reducing food poverty and building strong local food economies in areas of socio-economic deprivation. We have seen over the years how communities can come together around food production and cooking and how these stronger communities can then go on to work together to solve other local issues. We look forward to working with many more such communities in the years to come.

**Nick Weir, Open Food Network, UK**

Working with colleagues at Lancaster Uni/ N8 has helped to make this pilot a success. We now have 2 hubs operating in Preston selling produce from 4 farms. The action pack will enable us to encourage more hubs and farmers to get on board, we are currently working with housing associations to establish hubs in all their community centres and hope to see this rolled out across the whole of Lancashire. The pack will also assist us in our plan is to scale up this pilot by recruiting more farmers to supply local produce to our anchor institutions.

**Kay Johnson, The Larder, UK**

## What are the Local Food Hubs? What is the Open Food Network?

Local Food Hubs are networks of organisations and individuals that work together to build an alternative distribution model that aims to shorten the supply chain by connecting producers and consumers as directly as possible. It is configured as an alternative to supermarket that can bypass supply chain intermediaries, create a market for a number of small-scale local farms and producers, and secure fairer prices for both producers and consumers. In the UK, there is an increasing number of 'local food hubs', which, despite their possible differences in their organisation, function, products, or scale of operation, they all share a vision for creating a market place for locally produced food. Our study has focused on the Open Food Network Local Food Hubs. However, the findings of our study are aspired to share experiences that can provide some useful insights for other 'local food hubs' or for other organisations that aspire to build a 'local food hub'.

The Open Food Network UK (see [about.openfoodnetwork.org.uk](http://about.openfoodnetwork.org.uk)) is an on-line platform that provides the on-line infrastructure for creating a marketplace for locally produced food. The OFN provides local food producers with a free profile and the option to set up on-line 'shopfronts' as well as other facilities and functionalities that are necessary for undertaking and managing commerce through the internet – e.g. online payments, order and stock management and sales reports. Using the OFN platform, food producers can avoid the costs and complexities of purchasing website development services for their e-commerce needs. Local consumers, on the other hand, are offered a convenient, easy to browse and use marketplace that brings together in one place the products of different producers that can be ordered for and paid online in one single transaction.

OFN Local Food Hubs is a variant of local food hubs. They are organisations formed locally in order to provide the off-line infrastructure required for establishing a local food marketplace. This off-line infrastructure consists of the resources (e.g. premises and facilities), and the activities required for the marketplace to work. These include the aggregation of products from diverse producers and other suppliers in a single location, the appropriate storage of products, the sorting of suppliers' deliveries into individual customer orders, the collection/delivery of orders by/to customers, and the handling of cash payments.



Image 1: Off-line and On-line Food Hub Models (Source: OFN UK, 2017)

Nick Weir, a representative of OFN UK describes what the OFN is and its purpose:

*"[the] Open Food Network [in the UK] is a cooperative of producers, retailers, wholesalers and distributors, who collectively own our not-for-profit community interest company. We've developed open source software, which provides producers with the ability to list their produce and make their produce available, and the producer can then choose whether to sell that produce direct to the public or to sell it through a network of food hubs, food co-ops, farmers' markets and local shops. In fact anybody who might be interested in linking up with that producer can then set up an enterprise relationship within the software to sell the goods of that producer. So Open Food Network is a way for producers to get their produce to the shoppers as directly as possible, with as little involvement of middle men as possible. In short; an alternative to supermarkets."*  
(18/05/2017)

The OFN software was developed by the Open Food Foundation (see [openfoodnetwork.org](http://openfoodnetwork.org)), a not-for-profit charity registered in Australia, with the purpose of transforming food systems in the direction of localisation, environmental sustainability, resilience, and justice for farmers and consumers. According to its website, the Foundation was established in October 2012 to "develop, accumulate and protect open source knowledge, code, applications and platforms for fair and sustainable food systems" (OFN website, 24 May 2017).



The Foundation considers food as part of the global commons which need nurturing and protecting from privatisation, exploitation and depletion. In developing the OFN platform, the Foundation aimed at supporting a diversity of projects offering alternatives to and cumulatively changing the mainstream, supermarket-dominated, food system.

### **The Open Food Network in the UK**

In the UK, there are, at the time of writing (May 2018), more than 380 food shops and more than 800 food producers registered with OFN UK. Although definitive data are not available at the time of writing, the most successful Local Food Hubs, i.e. the ones with the biggest number of registered producers and consumers, appear to be the ones found in towns situated in largely agricultural areas in the South of England. Such hubs were established by people and community groups who have had a history of setting up local projects related to food and the environment and who are linked to national movements such as Transition Cities, and, serving customers who are willing and able to pay prices that are higher than those offered by large supermarkets and discount retailers. In the UK, the three older and bigger OFN Local Food Hubs are in Stroud, the Tamar Valley and the Forest of Dean. All three food hubs self-describe as co-operatives.

Stroudco Food Hub, in Stroud, Gloucestershire, as an example, was set up in 2008 and links closely with the Stroud Transition movement. It is a not-for-profit, community interest company run as a co-operative of food producers and food shoppers. Most of the food comes from within a 15-mile radius centred on Stroud. In order to satisfy demand for store cupboard items, the Hub also sells products, such as chickpeas and lentils which are not grown locally, from the food wholesaler Essential Trading Co-operative. In May 2018, according to a Stroudco representative, the hub had 836 registered consumers (not all of whom were active shoppers) and 89 producer members and offered more than 1,600 products for sale.

## Food Hubs and Food poverty

In 2017, OFN Local Food Hubs were piloted in relatively deprived areas of two UK cities, Preston and Newcastle, in collaboration with the Larder and the MeadowWell Community Centre. This was in order to understand and assess how OFN Local Food Hubs could help mitigate and alleviate food poverty in these areas. Though there were unique challenges in the development of both Hubs, it was found that Local Food Hubs can fulfil a unique place in the food provision landscape, being both a for-profit enterprise and a focus point for community.



Image 2: Preston meeting of prospective food hub co-ordinators with OFN representative (Fieldwork Photograph, 10 January 2017).

## The purpose of this Action Pack

This Action Pack is addressed to community organisations interested in setting up Local Food Hubs in their areas to address dimensions of food poverty so that they can benefit from the experience of others who took on the same endeavour.

With this document, we wish to share our learning from researching OFN Local Food Hubs as interventions to help address food poverty in collaboration with individuals and community organisations in three cities in the UK, London, Newcastle and Preston. To the best of our knowledge, the applicability of the OFN on-line platform to issues of food poverty in the UK has been hitherto untested. We are only aware of two other very recent projects, apart from the ones in our research sites, making use of the OFN platform and attempting to address food poverty, the Bentley Urban Farm in Doncaster, North East England (see [www.bentleyurbanfarm.com](http://www.bentleyurbanfarm.com)) and the 'Go Local' Project run by HALFF (Health and Local Food for Families, see [halff.org.uk](http://halff.org.uk)) which is a charity based in Axminster, Devon that helps people learn to cook and enjoy healthy and tasty food.

The focus on the OFN and food poverty in our research entailed a number of shifts of the prevalent model of OFN Local Food Hubs: a) a shift in purpose – by attempting to address issues of food poverty and food deserts in relatively deprived urban areas, while still opposing environmentally destructive farming and food distribution methods and supporting local, smaller-scale farmers; b) a shift in the customer profile – by including a wider constituency of consumers alongside engaged environmental campaigners and food enthusiasts, who may be relatively affluent and/or deeply interested in issues such as food provenance, farming methods and artisanal, craft production; c) a shift in setting – by including smaller towns in agricultural areas as well as relatively deprived areas in larger cities.

The value of this Action Pack derives from the fact that the topics and issues presented here emerged from research undertaken in collaboration with individuals and community groups (community centres, food co-ops, social enterprises) who were either potential (at the exploratory stage of considering the merits and demerits of establishing an OFN Hub),

prospective (actively planning to establish an OFN Hub) or current adopters (they started a Hub) of the OFN Local Food Hub model in their areas.

### **The structure of this Action Pack**

The Action Pack identifies five broad areas of consideration that emerged from our research as central in setting up an OFN Hub: 1. the intended customers/beneficiaries; 2. the local food producers and suppliers; 3. the resources necessary to set up and run a Hub and the operational realities of doing so; 4. potential partners, potential competitors and knowledge about the area and the local population served by the Hub; and, 5. the intended aims, objectives, impact and scale of the Hub. For each of these areas, we identify the main challenges raised or faced by the people and organisations in our research and the possible responses to these challenges that they considered or attempted.

### **Food for thought: steps to consider in preparation for setting up an OFN Local Food Hub**

#### **1. Get to know your intended customers/beneficiaries**

##### **How to find out more about your potential customers?**

A wide range of information, intelligence, opinion and analysis are available online on the topic of food poverty. The insights that can be gained from this literature are valuable and important. However, spending time to learn about the actual people living in the specific locality you wish to set up your Local Food Hub in is crucial.

##### **Here are a few suggestions on how could do that:**

- ❖ Get in touch with organisations that offer services to the populations you wish to focus on e.g. food banks, community centres, citizen advice bureaus, debt advice organisations, charitable organisations, religious organisations, and ask them about their experiences. What do these people think that the people they serve need?

- ❖ Conduct 1-to-1 interviews with people you would like to engage with the OFN Hub.
- ❖ Conduct group discussions with people you would like to engage with the OFN Hub.
- ❖ Create simple on-line surveys and ask organisations to share them with their service users. If you are asking people personal information, you must comply with Data Protection legislation.

Possible challenges you may face in your interactions with your customer base and possible responses

### **Challenge I: Digital exclusion**

- **Access to the internet**

Relying exclusively on an on-line tool may be a barrier for people who do not have access to the internet either because they do not own internet-capable devices or because they do not have access to the services of an Internet Service Provider

- **Access to e-banking and online payment methods**

Online payments may not be possible for people without access to mainstream retail e-banking services. Potential customers may be excluded from mainstream financial services and therefore may not be in the position to make electronic payments through the OFN on-line platform.

- **Digital literacy and fluency**

Potential customers of an OFN Hub may lack the skills, knowledge and confidence to make use of the internet in general and more specifically to make online purchases and to use online communication applications such as e-mail.

- **Functional illiteracy and innumeracy**

Potential customers may be functionally illiterate and innumerate.

## Possible responses

### ✓ **'Internet Buddies'**

This is a system used in the Stroudco Food Hub in Stroud and other OFN Hubs. People who for any reason do not use the online ordering facility are provided with printed catalogues of the products of the Hub and with the contact details of members of the Hub who have volunteered to act as 'internet buddies'. Internet buddies have agreed to be contacted by phone and to input a person's order over the phone to the Hub's online ordering system. The order is then paid for by cash on collection/delivery or the customer can set up a standing order to provide credit in their OFN account.

### ✓ **Printed product catalogues and paper order forms**

Customers are given the option to bypass the online ordering system. Customers have the option of filling in an order form in their own time and place or, if they wish, they can be supported by a member of the OFN Hub in browsing the product catalogue and putting in an order. Customers can then pay in cash for their order either at the time of ordering or at the time of collecting their order from the Hub. Printed product catalogues, however, may require updating or replacing to ensure that they maintain their currency.

### ✓ **Giving customers the option to pay in cash when they place their order or when they collect it**

OFN provides the option to 'tag' certain customers and certain payment methods. This allows the Hub manager to make the option to pay cash on collection available only to trusted customers.

### ✓ **Supporting customers to use existing IT facilities in the premises of the Hub**

Customers can be supported by Hub members in making online orders using any available IT facilities at the site of the Hub. It is important that customers are discouraged from sharing their credit or debit card details with the Hub member supporting them in this and are instead encouraged to pay in cash or set up a standing order to the Hub.



Image 3: Facilities and IT support are available at Meadow Well Community Centre to local food hub users (Fieldwork Photograph, January 2018).

## **Challenge II: Food Prices**

- **Price may be the most important consideration for customers**

Price may have a stronger influence on the customers' decision to shop from the Hub than other attributes of the food such as provenance, freshness, nutritional value, farming method (intensive vs. non-industrial). This is a complex consideration. Potential customers' financial circumstances may only allow them to purchase the cheapest available food. Potential customers may not share or have an interest in the environmental and social ambitions of the Hub. The fact that the Hub may be portrayed as an attempt at an environmental and economic alternative to mainstream agro-food systems may not resonate positively or at all with potential customers.

- **Food prices at the Hub relative to local food retailers**

The prices set by local suppliers/producers for the OFN Hub may or may not compare favourably to the prices of mainstream food retailers and/or independent, local shops.



- **Additional costs to shopping from the Hub**

In thinking what food costs to a customer, it is important to take account of the costs of cooking the food (in terms of gas/electricity consumed and time/effort) and the cost of shopping from the Hub (e.g. in terms of transport costs and time/effort). The difficult and challenging financial circumstances facing certain potential customers may require them to factor in these costs in their purchase decisions.

- **Customers in absolute poverty**

People finding themselves in extreme poverty may not be able to afford shopping from an OFN Hub at all. If the purpose of your hub is to support people in such circumstances then alternative arrangements must be made other than these people buying their food from the Hub. For example, similarly to what Stroudco Food Hub are doing, one of the hubs in our research are planning at the time of writing to donating a box of food hub produce to the food bank for every so many purchases. This strategy will hopefully encourage orders but also help ensure those in absolute poverty can benefit from the existence of the hub.

### **Possible responses**

- ✓ **Undertake a price comparison of the food sold through the OFN Hub against other food retailers in the area**

A collective purchasing organisation, involved in our research, found that their vegetable and fruit prices were half those of the local supermarket. The organisation used this finding in its promotional materials.

- ✓ **Communicate to potential customers the reasons why they might prefer to shop from the OFN Hub as opposed to mainstream food retailers**

This involves finding ways to communicate to potential customers the different ways in which the Hub may be beneficial to them and to people and groups that they care about. Our research suggests that people express a willingness to support locally produced food and local food producers as part of their local economy. At the same time, labels such as 'organic' and 'artisanal' may carry connotations of 'high prices' and of products marketed to the 'middle class'.



- ✓ **Introduce a 'meal-for-a-meal' scheme in order to provide fresh food to people who may not be able to pay for it**

One OFN Hub in our research was at the time of writing considering the idea to introduce a scheme whereby when a customer exceeded a certain level of spend at the Hub, the Hub would provide the ingredients for a free meal to a person in need.

- ✓ **Use the OFN online shopfront functionality of reducing food prices for selected customers**

The OFN online platform allows for different customers to be presented with different prices using the 'tagging' system. OFN Hubs may wish to use this functionality in the case of people deemed to be in need of cheaper or free food. However, Hubs in our research expressed the reservations that, firstly, processes of ascertaining an individual's financial status may be seen as undignified, and secondly, they may increase the administrative burden of running a Hub.

- ✓ **In the case of the Stroudco Food Hub, one way of reducing the cost of food to customers is to buy in bulk**

One of the Stroudco producers buys wholesale quantities of pasta, rice, sugar and other store cupboard items and then re-bags them to sell through the Hub in smaller quantities.

### **Challenge III: Customers' Food Preferences**

- **There may be a mismatch between what local food suppliers/producers can provide to an OFN Hub and the food preferences of potential customers including those of their household members (their children, grandparents, extended family)**

Potential customers may have different 'food cultures' i.e. different degrees of familiarity with different ingredients, different cooking techniques and recipes that they use or enjoy the most, different kinds of food they have childhood memories of, different shopping and eating routines and habits, different ways of integrating ready meals and takeaway meals in their diet. If, by setting up an OFN Hub, you wish to take an 'interventionist' perspective whereby you seek to effect change in other people's preferences or behaviour through instruction, education or the promotion of alternatives, it is important that you have a clear view on

people's food cultures otherwise you risk appearing as ignorant, prejudiced or patronising. Potential customers may have very specific requirements. For example, customers may not have the manual strength to prepare hard root vegetables such as swedes.

### Possible responses

- ✓ **Offer cooking sessions using recipes requiring a small number of ingredients and only the simplest of cooking equipment e.g. a pan, a portable stove, a knife and a chopping board.**

This requires that the premises hosting the OFN hub have facilities, e.g. space, equipment, that would allow these classes to take place. These cooking sessions are envisaged as also offering socialisation and community-enhancing benefits to their participants. In one of our research sites, an organisation participating in the promotion of OFN Food Hubs in relatively deprived city areas, trained a number of volunteers, the 'Food Champions', in issues of food preparation, cooking, storage, nutrition and hygiene. 'Food Champions' who worked in community organisations proceeded then to organise and lead cooking sessions of the kind described here in which cooking 'hacks', skills and nutritional knowledge was shared among participants.



Image 4: Trialling a cooking session at Community Centre, Preston (Fieldwork Photograph, May 2017)

- ✓ **Selling recipe ingredients in 'meal packs' alongside with a recipe card offering cooking instructions**

This approach was implemented in one of our research sites. The recipes were selected as representing a recognisable part of the area's food culture.



Image 5: Recipe Card included in North Shields Food Hub Meal Box (Source: North Shields Local Food Hub, December 2017)

- ✓ **Using the OFN on-line community forum to post recipes for vegetables that are in season.**

For example, leeks from a local supplier can be very inexpensive but shoppers need to find creative ways to cook them so that their families do not get bored of them. This national forum is used by all the OFN UK Hubs as a resource to share learning.

### **Challenge IV: Customers' Preferences for Food Appearance and Packaging**

- **Produce sold at an OFN Hub may differ in its appearance from produce sold at supermarkets**

Potential customers may be surprised by the mud on vegetables sourced from an organic farm. Customers may be accustomed to the appearance of food as presented in supermarket displays. Vegetables in particular are typically washed of all soil and often trimmed of excess leaves, stalks or roots. In addition, they are usually uniform in appearance and lack any blemishes, discolourings or shape irregularities. In contrast, organically and locally grown food may be unfamiliar in appearance (e.g. different colour, shape or size), not uniform, not washed of soil, carrying blemishes, discolourings and shape irregularities and may be sold without any stalks, leaves or roots previously removed.

### Possible responses

- ✓ **Organise promotional events**

In these events suppliers/producers will have the opportunity to speak about their produce and the reasons it differs from produce as usually found in supermarkets.



Image 6: 'Meet the farmers' event at the Intact Community Centre Food Hub point  
(Fieldwork Photograph, May 2018)

- ✓ **Organise food tasting sessions**

In these sessions potential customers have the opportunity to try raw or cooked produce.



Image 7: A Food Tasting Session around Rhubarb, organised by one of the local farmers supplier of food hubs in Preston (Fieldwork Photograph, May 2018)

### ✓ Organise cooking sessions

In these sessions potential customers have the opportunity to learn how to clean, trim and prepare produce and how to make use of the leaves and stalks usually missing from produce sold in supermarkets.

### Challenge V: Customers' Preferred Ways of Food Shopping

- **Potential customers may be disinclined to buy food online and may have an emphatic preference for being able to see and/or touch food items before buying them**

A related issue is that if accustomed to shopping by the number of items (e.g. two apples, three leeks), people may be unaccustomed to buying food purely on the basis of weight the way you may need to when shopping online.

## Possible responses

- ✓ **Organise promotional events in which customers have the opportunity to see, touch and sample the produce as sold by the Hub**

Explain how the OFN platform allows customers to message producers directly and provide them with feedback, comments, compliments or complaints.

- ✓ **In the descriptions of food items in the OFN 'shopfront' include as much relevant information as possible e.g. offer information the size and weight of fruit and vegetables (where appropriate and relatively consistent)**

OFN gives the producers and shopfront managers the option to define items by weight or by unit and to define the units e.g. number of apples.

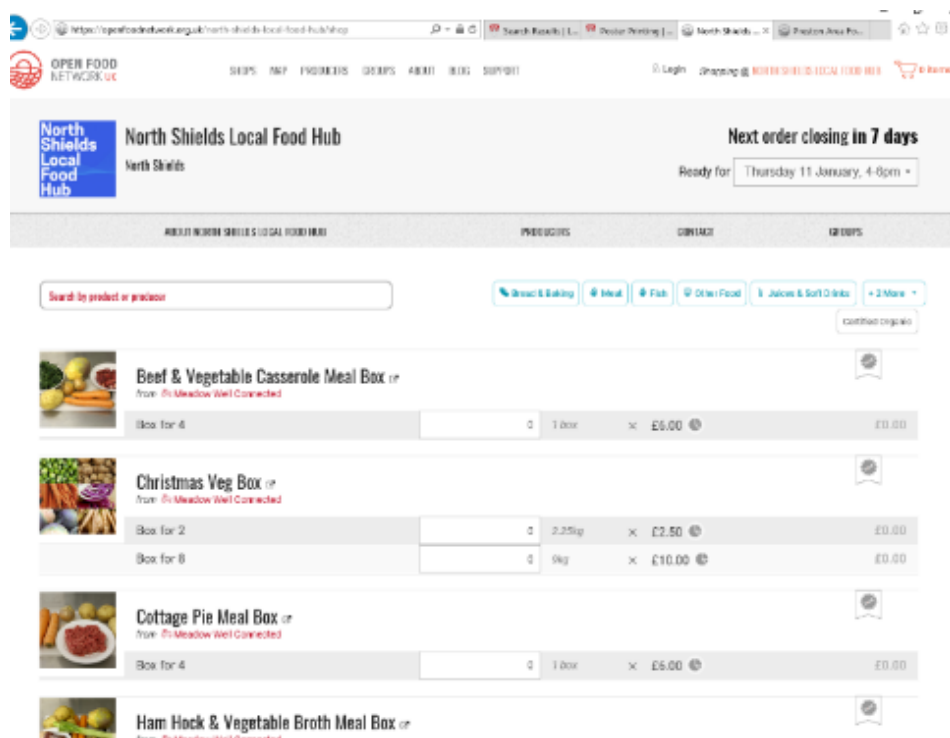


Image 8: Product details as appearing at North Shields Local Food Hub shop front, Newcastle (Webpage Screenshot, January 2018)

## **Challenge VI: Convenience and established food shopping habits**

- **Beginning to shop from an OFN Hub would require a change in established shopping routines and habits**

In addition, shopping from an OFN Hub may be less convenient than the one-stop shop offered by supermarkets.

### **Possible responses**

- ✓ **Offering a diverse range of food items that can be bought at the OFN Hub so that shopping trips to other food retailers are reduced.**
- ✓ **Consider opening times for the hub that will increase convenience for the customers in the locality. For instance, offer a daytime and an early evening collection to cater for those both in and out of work.**
- ✓ **OFN enables Hub managers to set up additional pick up points for people to collect from 24/7.**

If collecting orders from the Hub is a problem, OFN Hubs can set up pick-up points at convenient locations. These can be in cafes, pubs, schools, churches, a volunteer's house or a shed with a combination lock or a volunteer's garage with a fridge and freezer. In some cases, these pick-up points make a charge which OFN allows the Hub manager to add to the cost of the order at checkout. However, many pick-up points offer this service free of charge because customers collecting their orders increase footfall – e.g. when somebody collects from a café they might buy a cup of tea while they are there.

- ✓ **Hub managers can set up enterprise relationships with other local producers and Hubs to broaden the range available on the Hub shopfront.**

See the OFN guide on E2E permissions on the OFN website or get in touch with OFN UK for a discussion.

## **Challenge VII: Customer trust in the food suppliers of the OFN Hub**



**People may not trust food producers and suppliers that they do not know.**

- The fact that they are local alone does not necessarily mean that they are trusted over other retailers or product brands that customers habitually buy.

**Possible responses**

- ✓ **Organise promotional events in which suppliers/producers have the opportunity to speak about their produce and themselves.**

Explain how the OFN platform allows customers to message producers directly and provide them with feedback, comments, compliments or complaints.

- ✓ **Include detailed information about the food producers on promotional items, e.g. on a website linked to the shopfront or on recipe cards produced for meal boxes.**



Image 9: Meal box from North Shields Hub, Newcastle (Fieldwork photograph, January 2018).



- ✓ **Encourage producers to arrange work days on their farms where shoppers can come and help with work on the farm.**

### **Challenge VIII: The location of the Hub**

- **The cost of public transport may be prohibitive for customers who restrict their shopping to shops which are within walking distance.**

The availability of car parking facilities may also influence people's decision to shop from the Hub particularly for customers who do not have the physical ability to carry their shopping unaided to their home on foot.

### **Possible responses**

- ✓ **Locating the OFN Hub in an easily accessible location.**

This is the approach taken by two of our research sites where the OFN Hubs are hosted by local community centres situated within the communities that they aim to benefit.

- ✓ **The OFN Hub offering a delivery service.**

Such a service is offered by Stroudco Food Hub and the Tamar Valley Food Hub at an additional cost to the customer, varying with the location of the delivery point.

- ✓ **Set up alternative pick-up points.**

See point above.

### **Challenge IX: The language used to describe the food available through the Hub**

- **Labels carry differing emotional valences and differing cultural connotations.**

Terms such as 'organic', 'craft', 'artisanal' may carry positive connotations of desirable qualities such as being healthier to eat, containing fewer additives and colours, being kinder to the environment, being tastier or more nutritious but they may also carry negative connotations of being over-priced and of being addressed to the tastes and budget of the 'middle class' as opposed to 'ordinary' people. In two of the locations that we studied, there were indications that more people were more positively predisposed to the local provenance of the food as opposed to the farming method, organic or not. However, this

was a general observation and it was certainly the case that a number of people expressed concern for the environmental impact of dominant agricultural methods such as the excessive use of pesticides. The point to keep in mind is that what counts as 'good food' or as 'desirable food' cannot be taken for granted. These notions differ among individuals and groups of people. 'Local', 'organic', 'sustainable' are not universally perceived as positive labels.

### **Possible responses**

- ✓ **Use the learning from engaging with potential customers to adapt your message to your audience.**

### **Challenge: Customers' living circumstances**

- **The availability of domestic cooking equipment (fridges, ovens, stoves, microwave ovens, kettles, mixers etc.) and kitchen utensils (peelers, knives, whisks etc.) in the household of potential consumers may not be taken for granted.**

This may be particularly case for potential customers who may live in houses of multiple occupation or in hostels accommodating people who experience homelessness or who are alcohol or drug dependent.

### **Possible responses**

- ✓ **Offer cooking sessions using recipes requiring a small number of ingredients and only the simplest of cooking equipment (see above).**

Working with local community organisations may facilitate this as many offer courses on cooking on a budget or with limited facilities. Running these sessions using food hub ingredients can not only address the issue of consumers' living circumstances but also help familiarise them with the produce sold by the food hub.

- ✓ **Offer simple, pre-prepared, inexpensive ready meals.**

Like the ones offered by the social enterprise 'Our Kitchen on the Isle of Thanet' which tackles deprivation in a low income area of Kent by providing low cost ready meals and meal packs.



Image 10: Food cooked at a trial cooking session (Fieldwork Photograph, May 2017)

## 2. Get to know your potential suppliers

Possible challenges you may face in your interactions with suppliers and possible responses

### Challenge I: Attracting local suppliers' interest

- **Local suppliers may not be interested in selling to small retailers at all and/or they may not be able or willing to provide products with the qualities required by your Hub (price, weight/size, packaging and labelling, quantity).**
  - **their prices may not be competitive with those of the big supermarkets and discount stores.** Please see the section above for a discussion of price.
  - **they may not be able or willing to adjust the weight or size of their products to suit the preferences of your customers.** In this case, the price may be desirable but the product e.g. a packet of minced meat, may be too large for individuals living alone, or too small for a family.

- **they may not be able or willing to adjust the packaging or labelling of their products.** Retailers e.g. butchers, fishmongers, may be able to communicate the presence of allergens or other information about the ingredients of their products (e.g. burgers, fish cakes) to their customers directly. However, when buying from such retailers, a Hub would be legally obliged to comply with commercial labelling requirements. Unless the retailer would be willing to provide a list of ingredients, the Hub would then not be able to sell their products.
- **they may not be able to sell or deliver to the Hub very small quantities of their products.** Particularly, at the start-up phase, the Hub may be selling only very small quantities of a particular product. The supplier in this case may be unwilling to deliver to the Hub or even to sell to the Hub.
- **they may not be interested in selling to small retailers at all including your Hub.** Food producers may choose to only trade with large food wholesalers to whom they can sell wholesale volumes.

### Possible responses

#### ✓ Explore how you can adapt to the constraints placed by suppliers.

If they cannot deliver to the Hub, maybe you can collect from them. If they cannot adjust the weight or size of their products maybe you could do that at the Hub assuming you had the labour and the facilities. In this case, you would also need to consider very carefully the relevant health and safety regulations.

#### ✓ Reconsider your definition of a 'producer'.

Many OFN Hubs sell produce which is surplus vegetables from allotments that would be thrown away if not distributed by the Hub. If you have questions about the legal status of selling produce from an allotment, please get in touch with OFN UK.

**Challenge II: There may be a mismatch between the food produced by local food suppliers and the preferences of your customers.**

**The local food economy may not include a variety of producers offering a variety of products that are desirable to your intended customers.**

Please see the previous section for a discussion of this.

### **Possible responses**

**Explore the idea of stocking food from food wholesalers who are local or who specialise in food that is produced ethically.**

The Stroudco Food Hub sells products, such as chickpeas and lentils which are not grown locally, from the food wholesaler Essential Trading Co-operative.

### **Challenge III: Recruiting local food producers**

- **Identifying local food producers and creating a working relationship with them requires time and effort.**

This may be particularly so in large cities with little perceived or felt connections to the countryside. Farmers may be very time-constrained and also in a situation of financial insecurity and therefore not receptive to your message.

- **Bringing suppliers on board your project may be complicated by the following:**
  - the OFN model may be unfamiliar to local food producers and suppliers.
  - learning to use the OFN platform and maintaining an updated 'shopfront' may be perceived as adding various costs e.g. time, effort or money to their existing operations. Suppliers need to make a judgement of whether their involvement with an OFN Hub justifies the unavoidable opportunity costs.
  - as an intervention in patterns of food poverty, OFN Hubs are untested and therefore you cannot rely on an existing record of success.

### **Possible responses**

- ✓ **Prepare a clear and concise 'pitch' for the idea of an OFN Hub.**

Explain how it will work. Prepare explanatory, promotional material, e.g. leaflets, to give to food producers so that they can consider them after your meeting with them.

- ✓ **Explore the possibility of receiving produce from small-scale, local, community food growing projects or grow your own food as an organisation.**

Connect with local growing projects and explain the idea of the OFN Hub. Explore ways of helping each other. If you do not already grow your own food as an organisation explore the possibility of doing so and using your produce for the purposes of your hub. Please also consider the intricacies around allotments, as discussed above.

- **However, this option comes with its own challenges.**

Small-scale, local growing projects typically may not produce volumes big enough to supply a Hub; the range of produce grown may be limited; locally grown vegetables may not match the glossy, uniform appearance of supermarket-sold produce and therefore may appear unfamiliar and undesirable to consumers; and, finally, there is the issue of seasonality: consumers may not be used to only being able to get certain products at certain times of the year. If you are already growing your own food, you may already be using it for other purposes (e.g. cafes) which puts a constraint as to how much can be used for the purposes of the OFN food hubs.



Image 11: Local Food Garden at a Food Hub Point, Intact Community Centre Preston  
(Fieldwork Photograph, July 2017)

✓ **Explore the possibility of stocking surplus food.**

Donated surplus food cannot typically be re-sold so the Hub would act as a distribution point and not as a retailer in the case of surplus food.

• **However, surplus food raises the following concerns:**

It may lack variety and nutritional value and may not be desirable to potential Hub customers; collecting and delivering surplus food requires the right logistics system to be in place; organising and co-ordinating this logistics (collection, transport and delivery) system requires effort and time; surplus food-donating organisation may not provide advance notice of the availability of surplus food which complicates logistics.

**Possible responses to the challenges of using surplus food:**

✓ **It is possible to form personal, collaborative relationships with food wholesalers and distributors**

e.g. local companies distributing produce to local schools, and with food waste national charities that would enable you to circumvent certain of the logistics problems associated with surplus food by being able to know what was available by these suppliers and to have produce delivered but also by being exempted from certain of the fees these organisations charged. However, starting and cultivating such relationships of cooperation may not be an option for people and organisations not already involved in prominent food-related networks in an area.

✓ **Collecting produce from gleaning events.**

✓ **Carefully explore the possibility of receiving produce from local allotments.**

Local growers may be happy to sell produce to the Hub or to even donate surplus produce. However, different interpretations exist as to whether it is legal or right to sell produce grown on public land. The tenancy agreement provided to allotment holders by the Council may specify whether selling produce grown in the allotments is permissible by the Council. OFN UK can provide further advice on this issue.

✓ **Stroudco uses internet buddies to work with producers in a similar way to the shopper buddies.**

The producers phone their buddies to update stock levels,

new products etc. In some cases the buddy contacts the producer each week to check accuracy of price lists.

### **3. Identify the resources needed to set up and run an OFN Food Hub. Seek to understand the operational reality of setting up and running an OFN Food Hub.**

How to find out more about required resources and operational realities:

- ❖ Contact OFN UK by e-mail or through their community forum and discuss your plans with them.
- ❖ Identify any existing OFN Hubs near you and arrange a visit to them.
- ❖ Contact related food projects in your area and discuss your plans.

What challenges you may face and possible responses to them

#### **Challenge I: Having enough people to undertake the online and off-line work of setting up and running the Hub.**

Examples of off-line work are: receiving deliveries from suppliers, appropriately storing produce, sorting produce into individual orders, serving customers on collection day, answering customer queries, dealing with unexpected contingencies, trouble-shooting, handling cash. Examples of on-line work are: setting up a Hub shopfront, updating product lists and product prices, generating information reports. Many existing Hubs rely on volunteer labour for the management and operation. The Stroudco Food Hub rewards volunteers with credit which they can exchange for products sold through the Hub.

#### **Possible responses**

- ✓ **If your OFN Hub is hosted by another organisation, such as a community centre, employees of the host organisation may have the capacity to support the Hub's operations.**

In two of our research sites which were community centres, most of the work required was undertaken by volunteers who were supported by employees of the community centre.



### ✓ **Employing volunteer labour.**

For example, the founder of an OFN Hub in one of our research site did not get paid for her work of starting and running the Hub. She was however exploring the prospect of using the Hub in the future as a platform for selling the products of her own food start-up. In another example, the Hub was run by a postgraduate student who had entered into a research agreement with a community centre (although at a later stage the work was gradually taken over by community centre staff). In a third example, a volunteer who was retired had the capacity and motivation to drive the development of a Hub while at the same time running two other food-related projects.

### **These possible responses come with their own challenges.**

#### • **Funding People's Work**

The tactics of adding to the workload of existing employees and of using volunteers entail limitations to the amount of time either staff or volunteers will be able to put in running the hub. Such limitations became evident in one of our research sites in which the person driving the development of the Hubs was working in an unpaid capacity. The time available to contribute to the project was severely curtailed by her efforts to secure an income. As a consequence, the development of the Hubs was substantially delayed. Moreover, volunteers bring valuable contributions but their labour is voluntary and so cannot be relied on for critical activities. Finally, volunteers may need support and supervision by members of staff.

### **Possible response**

#### ✓ **OFN gives the Hub manager the option to add an enterprise fee to the products sold through the Hub.**

This is often a small percentage mark-up. These fees can be used to pay some or all of the Hub workers. The more the Hub sells, the bigger the income.

### **Challenge II: Having adequate funds to ensure the viability of the Hub**

#### • **Securing start-up funding**

This is to cover initial purchases and operating costs prior to generating revenue

#### • **Ensuring financial sustainability.**

It is not uncommon for pilot projects to not be able to sustain themselves once their initial funding had been depleted.

### **Possible responses**

- ✓ **Financial self-sufficiency through trading and charging for products and/or services e.g. cooking classes.**

However, there may be a conflict between the aims of charging lower prices for healthy, fresh produce in order to serve people in circumstances of food poverty and generating enough revenue to cover costs.

- ✓ **Tendering for contracts for the delivery of services.**

Contracts for services related to food, health, wellbeing and community development may be advertised by public bodies such as the Clinical Commissioning Groups, government departments, charitable bodies and European Union-funded programmes. However, in order to tender for contracts involves exploring how OFN Hubs align with the aims and objectives specified in these contracts. Further, winning, administering and delivering contracts carry their own challenges, namely, having the requisite infrastructure in place to administer and deliver the contract, to produce the requisite documentation e.g. business plans, and to evidence financial self-sufficiency and sustainability at the end of the funding term.

- ✓ **Seeking grant-funding from foundations and charitable trusts.**

However, grant funding can often be an insecure and unreliable source of financing. The administration of grants can be complicated and time-consuming.

- ✓ **Minimising the operational costs of the Hub by utilising as much as possible already existing resources e.g. premises, employee time, volunteers, promotional channels e.g. e-mailing lists.**

One collective purchasing group explained that it delivered customers' orders in a van belonging to a local housing association who was supporting the group's attempts to make affordable, healthy fresh produce available to the housing association's tenants.

- ✓ **Learning from food-related projects elsewhere that appear to have achieved financial sustainability and sufficiency.**

Undertaking research visits and making requests for knowledge sharing. This can also be done via the OFN community forum (see [community.openfoodnetwork.org.uk/](https://community.openfoodnetwork.org.uk/)). You can find more specific information on the OFN community forum.

- ✓ **Seeking social finance e.g. social impact bonds.**

This is a relatively new financing instrument and as such it is not very common and may be exceedingly complex. There is advice and support available from Co-ops UK to support financing of community co-ops.

### **Challenge III: Having the necessary premises & facilities**

- **Finding appropriate spaces and facilities for Hub members (paid or volunteers) to sort produce into individual customer orders, for customers to pick up their orders, for storing food appropriately, and for hosting activities such as cooking sessions.**

Lack of suitable storage facilities is likely to limit the amount and type of food that a Hub could receive from suppliers and to complicate the scheduling of delivery by producers and order collection by customers.

### **Possible responses**

- ✓ **Make use of premises and facilities made available by other organisations such as schools, churches and community centres and cafés.**

According to OFN UK representative, Nick Weir, schools are often keen to host a hub as this meets their 'community engagement' requirement to make their premises available to the local community outside of school hours. OFN UK can provide an action pack about setting up Local Food Hubs in schools.

### **Challenge IV: Marketing and advertising**

- **Creating and disseminating marketing, advertising and promotional materials.**

These include leaflets, posters, posts on social media, press releases for local media, directed both at potential customers but also potential suppliers, food producers and other stakeholders e.g. local schools, churches, other food-related projects. Producing these materials takes time, effort and skill as does disseminating these materials so that they reach their intended audience.

## Possible responses

- ✓ **Advertising the OFN Hubs to an audience that one already has existing relationships with.**

Across all our research sites, the organisations adopting the OFN Hub model intended to advertise it and promote it among people who were already engaging with the organisation as users of services, volunteers, employees or members. One organisation carried out leafleting in the surrounding area but it was not considered effective.

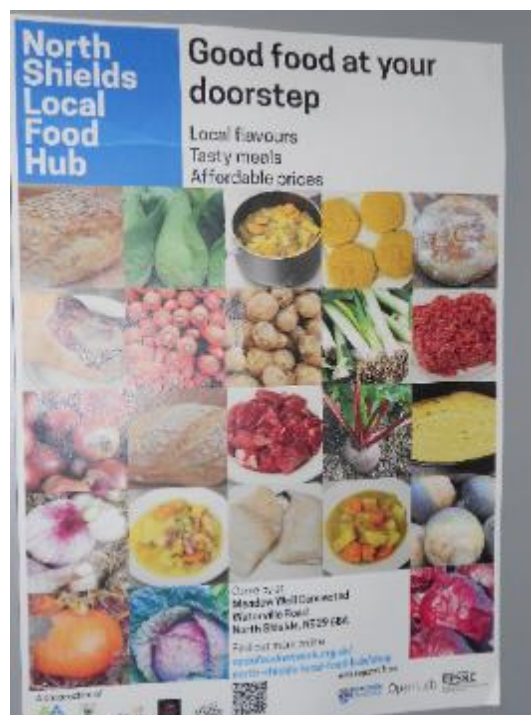


Image 12: Poster used for disseminating purposes within Meadowell Community Centre (Fieldwork Photograph, January 2018).

✓ **Engaging with Social Media.**

This is seen as a useful strategy because it is fairly low cost and it does allow for engaging and interactive advertising. However, it may not adequately reach your intended customers. One site is incorporating social media competitions to develop meal box ideas as generated and posted by customers (using food hub ingredients) and to spread the food hub network.

✓ **The Stroudco Food Hub approached their local newspaper** offering to write a regular column for their 'food and drink' page or 'community' page.

The newspaper said yes and they have been doing it for several years. Stroudco Food Hub can provide interested people with a document drafted in 2015 reviewing their experiences and their marketing approaches.

**Challenge V: Learning to use the OFN online platform competently**

**Becoming familiar with the functionalities of the OFN platform.**

**Possible Responses**

**OFN UK offer support to people taking a lead in setting up a hub.**

In one research site, OFN UK staged online meetings in which people were given demonstrations of how to use the different functionalities of the OFN online platform. For a starter on the support provided by OFN UK, have a look at the Support page on the OFN UK website: [about.openfoodnetwork.org.uk/support](http://about.openfoodnetwork.org.uk/support)

**4. Identify potential allies and competitors. Familiarise yourself with the area in which you will be operating.**

What challenges you may face and possible responses to them

**Challenge I: Working in isolation**

- **Get a 'helicopter view' of what other people or collectivities are doing about related issues in your area.**

It is not uncommon for projects working on the same social issues to be operating in parallel unaware of each other's existence. In this way, opportunities for collaboration, sharing of resources, shared learning and synergies are missed. By quickly creating a rough map of relevant projects in your area you reduce the risk of unnecessary duplicating already existing work, you may identify potential collaborators to partner with and you will be less likely to antagonise other food retailers or food-related community projects.

## Possible responses

### ✓ Identify and visit other food-related projects

These projects include food co-ops, food banks, community cafés and 'fridges'. Have a discussion about the OFN Hub with the people running them. Ask them to point you to other food-related work taking place in the area. Use the OFN community forum

### ✓ Seek other organisations as potential partners that may be able to share resources with you e.g. community centres, schools, universities, colleges, churches, charities, food-related social movements.

Existing OFN Food Hubs in the UK are linked with:

- ❖ community centres operated by charitable organisations. Community centres host OFN Hubs offering them premises, storage and access to the users of the centres;
- ❖ church halls used as collection points for food orders;
- ❖ food-related movements such as Transition Towns, Incredible Edible, Sustainable Food Cities. People involved in such initiatives offer their time and effort as volunteers or may be the organisers of the OFN Hub.
- ❖ Universities. In one pilot site, a doctoral researcher from a local university has volunteered his time to help set up and run an OFN Hub hosted by a community centre while also carrying out academic research related to the Hub. In this way, community centre staff did not have to sacrifice much of their time to support the Hub.
- ❖ Schools. OFN UK can provide you with an action pack if you are interested in partnering with schools in your area.

- ✓ **Get a sense of whether your project may be seen as antagonising people who are already involved in food-related projects or even small, local retailers who may be afraid their custom and sales may be reduced.**

Nick Weir of OFN UK suggests exploring with these people if they can collaborate with you rather than seeing you as competition. For example, you could sell their products on the Hub shopfront; they could be a pick-up point (see above) which will increase foot-fall in their shop. You could agree not to stock certain products on the Hub which are for sale in their shop.

- ✓ **Identify any work on the issue of food poverty undertaken by public institutions such as local government, the NHS and local schools and have a discussion about the OFN Hub with the people involved in them.**

Representatives of public institutions may be very helpful in offering insight into the impact of policy changes, e.g. the roll-out of Universal Credit, and socio-economic changes e.g. the rise of food inflation, on your intended beneficiaries.

## **Challenge II: 'Fitting in' and adapting to the needs of your area**

- **Get a sense of the demographic and socio-economic profile of the area.**

Talking to potential customers directly is very valuable but you may be able to gain valuable information by learning about the demographic and socio-economic profile of the area. Relevant information can be things like: the composition of households (e.g. the proportion of large families as against single households), unemployment and state benefit claimant rates, the age distribution of the local population, disability, ill-health and deprivation estimates and also information more specifically related to food such as the distribution of greengrocers and small retailers, and the distribution of big supermarkets and discount stores.

### **Possible responses**

- ✓ **The websites of local authorities and local and national NHS bodies (e.g. Public Health England) typically offer very detailed demographic and socio-economic information on local areas even down to the level of neighbourhoods.**

Further, local authority and health bodies typically have community engagement teams who welcome input and interaction from the local community and who may welcome being introduced to an innovative project like the setting up of an OFN Hub.

**5. Articulate clearly what you would like the OFN Hub to achieve, what impact you would like the OFN Hub to have and what scale the OFN Hub would need to attain in order to realise this impact.**

What challenges you may face and possible responses to them

**Challenge I: Given that food poverty is a complex, multi-dimensional problem, which specific aims will you choose to focus on at least initially?**

- **In light of what you have learnt by engaging with potential customers, suppliers and other community food projects, you may want to revisit your aims and objectives in setting up an OFN Hub as an intervention in food poverty.**

**Possible responses**

**Specifying and clarifying your aims and objectives may help you to focus your efforts and resources more effectively and efficiently.**

For example, an OFN Hub may set out to achieve any single one or any combination of the following aims:

- ❖ increase consumer choice in the area by promoting fresh and locally-produced food even if your prices are not directly competitive to those of large supermarkets and discount stores;
- ❖ to expand people's cooking skills and nutritional knowledge by offering practical, educational sessions on cooking and nutrition in order to address nutrient-poor diets and unhealthy food choices;
- ❖ to offer an educational or employment experience to students outside mainstream education and/or to adults excluded from or facing barriers in the labour market;
- ❖ to use locally-produced food as a focus for building new and deeper community bonds helping to address issues such as social isolation



- ✓ **The people and community organisations we spoke to thought that OFN Hubs are unlikely to have the potential to replace food banks.**

OFN Hubs were seen however as having the potential to positively impact on a range of other manifestations of food poverty, holding back the “cliff edge”.

- ✓ **Nick Weir of OFN UK suggested that OFN can be used to administer a food bank separately from a food Hub.**

**Challenge II: Given the very large number of people estimated to be affected by food poverty and to be vulnerable to experiencing food poverty, what will success look like for you at different stages of your endeavour to make a difference by setting up an OFN Hub?**

- **Once you have narrowed down your specific aims and objectives, you may want to address the question of what scale you would like the Hub to achieve in its operations and impact.**

E.g. consider what scale would be necessary for the project to be thought of as successful.

### **Possible responses**

- ✓ **Different possible ideas of what success may look like are the following:**
  - ❖ creating a financially sustainable and independent, food-retailing social enterprise
  - ❖ selling a given volume of fresh, locally-produced food per week
  - ❖ creating a given number of educational and employment opportunities giving people experience, knowledge and skills of working in a food-retailing enterprise
  - ❖ achieving food prices that are competitive to those of the large supermarkets and discount stores
  - ❖ holding a given number of sessions on cooking and nutrition and reaching a given number of participants
  - ❖ achieving a certain number of registered customers
  - ❖ achieving a certain number of registered suppliers

- ❖ achieving a certain number of total sales per unit of time

### **Last but not least...**

**Each food hub is different, depending on its surrounding area and the people it is aimed to cater for. Based on all above, test your ideas by running a time-bounded pilot in a way that minimises costs and risks to all the people involved. Evaluate the learning from the pilot and take it from there.**







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